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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - The Great Handshake Debate

Summary

11. (SBU) Much ado has been made about the handshake between Secretary Clinton and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed during their August 6 meeting in Nairobi. Prior to the meeting, Somalis of all walks of life speculated on whether or not Sharif would indeed shake the Secretary's hand. After the handshake was captured on video and photograph, Somalis' reactions ranged from entirely positive to speculation that extremists would attempt to amputate Sharif's hand upon his return to Mogadishu. Sharif's staff told us the handshake was never a concern for Sharif, who resolved to make the gesture and then focused on the content of the meeting. End Summary.

The Anticipation

12. (SBU) Prior to the August 6 meeting in Nairobi between Secretary Clinton and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, the first meeting between a TFG President and U.S. Secretary of State (septel), speculation about whether or not Sharif would shake hands with the Secretary threatened to overshadow the significance of the meeting. During several meetings with U.S. officials, notably including former AF Assistant Secretary Frazer before Sharif became President, he had avoided shaking hands. Contacts told us that while Islam does not specifically forbid this gesture, the controversy reflected concern about Sharif acting against more conservative customs that have been introduced by Gulf Arabs into Somalia over the past 20 years, mostly through educational centers run mainly by Wahhabi organizations.

13. (SBU) The Washington Post published an online article just hours before the meeting focusing not on the historic encounter, but on speculation about a possible handshake. Another Somali contact speculated that U.S. and international support for Sheikh Sharif and the TFG had subconsciously dampened extremists' morale while lifting the spirits of ordinary Somalis, who are longing for Somalia's troubles to end so they can reconstruct their lives. The same contact said that among the vast majority of Somalis, there was no controversy, stating that "It's an issue which fascinates only simpletons and people engulfed with ignorance, who have no idea how the world works." He said that in his judgment, Somalis' prime preoccupation was physical and psychological security, food and shelter, and the most basic of necessities. A handshake, he said, came nowhere near top of a list of priorities. Before the start of the joint press conference that followed the bilateral meeting, some Somali journalists told us they were eager for pictures of Sharif shaking hands with the Secretary, saying they could make a good

story out of it.

¶4. (SBU) The Somali Ambassador to Kenya, who facilitated the meeting and who had discussed with President Sharif the question of whether or not to shake hands, seemed somewhat amused at the attention given to the issue. He claimed that President Sharif had said that "he would shake with both hands" if that would emphasize the inane nature of this debate, especially against the backdrop of this historic meeting.

Three Handshakes

¶5. (SBU) Sharif did not hesitate to shake the Secretary's hand when they first greeted each other. During the camera spray immediately preceding the bilateral meeting, the photographers specifically asked the two to shake hands once more. At the end of their press conference, Sharif once again greeted Secretary Clinton with both hands.

The Reactions

¶6. (SBU) Though we are still collecting media reactions, initial responses to the handshakes have ranged from positive to entirely hostile. International and Somali media broadcast images of the handshakes. A journalist with Somali National Post newspaper said "Sheikh Sharif did the right thing to shake hands with Secretary Clinton." A BBC Somali Service journalist said "this was totally

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unexpected and will further enrage the Islamists because, as the former leader of Islamic courts, it shows how much [Sharif] has transformed." Talk of the handshake dominated an Internet cafe in Eastleigh, Nairobi's Somali enclave, on the evening of the meeting. One young man said, "This is what people have been waiting for." Another man said, "[al-Shabaab] will cut his hand off when he returns to Mogadishu." Another man said "at least Sharif has done what others before him have not done," referring to the historic nature of the TFG President meeting the U.S. Secretary of State. The same man said that Sharif "seems genuine that he wants to save Somalia." An extremist website showed pictures of president Sharif and the Secretary shaking hands, with the caption "Sharif extends firm hand to Clinton."

RANNEBERGER